

DISINTERRING GRAEBER: THE FIRST FIVE YEARS

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Graeber sat to the right of Peter Thiel physically but not politically during a 2014 debate in New York City. Photo by [mike](#). Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license.

“When [David] Graeber died, five years ago today, he was just about the most important public intellectual in the world” asserts Thomas Peermohamed Lambert (“[David Graeber: the Left’s lost hero](#),” UnHerd, September 2). An unlikely position for the author of tomes covering “some of the most mind-numbing subjects,” from the originations of finance to managerial administration, whose defiant anti-authoritarianism apparently mapped “a kind of ‘road not taken’ for the political Left” which has since veered ever more sharply into pinning all their hopes and fears on the next election.

Yet Lambert can count Graeber’s bestsellers “among the few genuinely popular Left-wing texts of our time,” offering “the same, visceral appeal as today’s Right-wing populists” — who have taken up such themes as emphasizing “‘values’ as distinct from ‘value’” (no longer the domain of such leftists as *The Value of Nothing: How to Reshape Market Society and Redefine Democracy* author Raj Patel), “paeans to untrammelled human creativity” Graeber made in the face of the sort of tech billionaire via which such techno-utopianism is now judged guilty by association, and exploring “the horrors of modern bureaucracy” while “the ‘b’ word is hardly ever uttered by progressives” (at least those who, unlike Argentine comic-strip character Mafalda, don’t need to holler the name of an eponymous [pet turtle](#)) more comfortable with “the language of enlightened paternalism.”

Even being “deeply anti-capitalist, and convinced that the society he lived in needed massive social transformation,” which Lambert points to as the dividing line between Graeber and the right, could easily sound closer to the “[Birkenstocked Burkeans](#)” of *National Review*’s Rod Dreher than a Biden-era brat summer. *The Economist*, the newspaper in which Lambert locates the “orthodox line of rebuttal” to Graeber that seemingly wasteful jobs “ultimately benefit humanity by increasing production,” had once employed the laissez-faire liberal Herbert Spencer who had [argued](#) that in self-managed worker cooperatives where “each obtains exactly the remuneration due for his work, *minus* only the cost of administration, the productive power of the concern is greatly increased.”

Graeber would at least not quarrel with Lambert that avowed anarchism was “far rarer in academic life” than Marxism.” In 2004, Graeber himself had [asserted](#) (with coauthor Andrej Grubacic) that “there are still thousands of academic Marxists, but almost no academic anarchists,” with the professoriate preferring “the only great social movement that was invented by a Ph.D.” Even then, the ranks of respected academic anarchist anthropologists included Harold Barclay and James C. Scott together with Graeber. And for decades before and since 2004, one of the all-time most cited living academics has been anti-Marxist anarchist Noam Chomsky.

Auburn’s academic anarchist Roderick Long [summed up](#): “Graeber’s liberatory vision” has much of value as “a useful corrective for those” — including Graeber himself, who had previously [dismissed](#) “terms like *free enterprise*” as cover for “the sordid economic reality, one where productive wealth was controlled by the few for their own benefit” — “who are too quick to take the case for free enterprise as a validation of the perversities of the existing ... market.”

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